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Writing Sample

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Includes excerpt from Cotton & Jade, "The Gravedigger," "The Stray Cat," and "Hair."

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Verena TAY

A Short Monologue and Three Short Stories

Cotton & Jade was a solo performance that I created and performed during 2000/2001. A recreation of the stories of the women in my family, from my great-grandmother down to my nieces, *Cotton & Jade* explored universal issues of identity, family ties and womanhood.

Excerpt from Cotton & Jade

JJ: (*clasp*ing capacious handbag) Keng Joo, Tian Swee! Keng Joo, Tian Swee – it's Ah Ma! Quick, open the door! Aiyah, open the door! Got many things for you all – biscuits, *kum*, dried pork... So heavy! Eh, today so hot – everything going to spoil soon! No one in? But someone always home... See got their shoes and slippers... So funny... Ei... (*Someone is practising Rachmaninoff on the piano.*) It's Keng Joo! So beautiful... My grandson so clever! He can play piano, he can study – next time, he can become doctor, lawyer, Minister, businessman and earn money...

Eeeeyah! Damn cat! Go away!

Aiyah, Keng Joo, Tian Swee, open the door! Don't bluff – I know you're in. I can hear Keng Joo and your window got someone...

Eeeyahh! Shoo! Go away!

See you don't let me in, now the stray cats want to eat the food. Open the door. Shoo! Aiyah, Tian Swee, let your mother in. Don't play games lah. I just want to see you and my grandson. I never see you and the boy – I want to know how your business is doing, how well Keng Joo is doing in school. Like that nothing wrong what?

Listen... no one else in the family can do that...

Tian Swee, today so hot! I'm sweating all over and I'm very thirsty. At least let me in and rest and drink some water. Why are you treating your mother like that? If you don't let me in, your wife sure will. She is a kind woman. Poh Luan ah! Poh Luan! Where is she?

Eeeyahh! Go away! No! Go! I said go!

Tian Swee, the stray cats so fierce today! Why you don't let me in? What I do to you? Not my fault they make me leave you behind. I want to stay. But your father die already and the family don't want me. They say, you sing-song girl, you are not Tay family, you're outsider, stray cat the old man feed. Some money – here – you take and leave us and go marry your lover. And you must leave Tian Swee and Geok Bee here... But I... don't want...

Tian Swee, all this so long ago. Why you never forgive me? Aiyah, you're so stubborn! When you're a baby, you also so naughty! See, I don't even want to ask if I can stay with you. I know you don't like. I only want to see you and your children. What's wrong with that?

OK, I don't care anymore. You know why I come? Fine, I let the whole world know. (*producing a large piece of jade*) I want to give Keng Joo this! I want to come and give this quietly so outsiders don't see and come and steal. But no, you make me shout so everyone can hear. This was my mother's. I want to give my grandson. I want him to remember me, and I want his son's son, his son's son to remember me! Tian Swee, you think you can ignore me, you think you can make my grandchildren not even know my name. But don't forget, got a bit of me live inside your children, and your children's children. You like or not, you can never keep me out.

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(Singapore: SNP Editions, 2004).

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The Gravedigger

It was one of those days—overcast, hot and the humidity just building up with every hour. By evening, there was still no rain yet to relieve the sticky oppressive air. Every little movement would cause a person to pour with sweat, adding to the general sense of dis-ease.

Under the still evening sky, threateningly red with rain, a mini human monsoon was raging in the dark remote village graveyard next to the black jungle. Sweat rolled profusely down the face, chest, back and arms of Saifuddin the gravedigger, busy alone at work by the light of his sole lantern. No bird screeched; no cricket chirped; no wind rustled the leaves of the trees. The only sounds were Saifuddin's grunts and the impact of his changkul as he dug into the ground. Saifuddin moved the earth impatiently. Was he digging a grave? Was he burying a body? No, he was determined to unearth a freshly buried corpse, the body of Nora, the beloved virginal village beauty who had succumbed to a mysterious fever that very morning.

Saifuddin was angry. He should have finished his task a long time ago. But no, the grieving relatives of Nora had stayed on to see that her corpse was properly buried so that Saifuddin could not cheat in his duty. Then they remained by her graveside for hours, mourning. The most disconsolate had been Nora's betrothed, Ali, who kept wailing, "Aiyoh, Nora! Kamu hati ku! My precious heart and liver! When will I ever hear my pretty merbok sing again?" Indeed, Nora had had the sweetest voice of all the village girls and her singing had drawn Ali, the brave hunter, to her. Ali was so distraught with her sudden passing that he wanted to throw himself into her open grave to be buried along with her—but he was held back by

anxious family members. Only at dusk did relatives manage to persuade Ali to leave Nora alone and return home. Saifuddin then waited an hour after the last of the funeral party had left before he began digging up the corpse he had only buried hours before.

Luckily, the loose earth was relatively easy to move this time. But it was still no mean feat digging in the clammy humidity. The passion that Saifuddin threw into his task was not driven by some perverse necrophiliac desire. No, it was far simpler than that. With each heave of his changkul, Saifuddin muttered, "That bomoh better pay me well this time!" You see, he had a secret pact with a powerful bomoh that lived deep in the jungle: \$50 for every heart, liver, lung, eyeball, tongue and other organs in good condition from a human body dead less than 24 hours; triple the price if the corpse was a virgin girl at death. What the bomoh did with these body parts, Saifuddin never cared to ask. But at last, he could profit from his thankless job of grave digging and earn more money, provided he was careful that none of the other villagers knew what he was doing with the remains of their dead loved ones.

The fate that lay for Nora's body was no less different from what Saifuddin had done to other corpses. But there was greater urgency this time to reach the girl before the rains fell and turned the graveyard to mud. With one last heave of his changkul, Saifuddin cleared earth away from the white linen-wrapped torso and head of the corpse. He reached for his knife and skilfully slit the cloth apart, revealing Nora's slender frame. She seemed to be sleeping and could wake up at any time to laugh and sing merrily as she used to.

Saifuddin gazed at Nora's face. He had never been so close to her before, for while she was alive, this popular village girl never paid any notice to someone as menial as he. Now she looked so beautiful in death, her delicate features even finer than ever before. Shyly, he reached out a finger to trace her luscious bee-stung lips through which many an entrancing song had come. It seemed a pity to violate such perfection. Then, he recalled the bomoh's words, "Beware a virgin's charms!" He withdrew his hand, clutched his knife and reminded himself that he had a job to do. Without further hesitation, he went to work with his knife.

At the first slice, the heavy humidity seemed to bear down on him, pressurising him to stop. Yet Saifuddin persisted, encouraged by dreams of a fat reward. At the third cut, a thin arc of electric white flashed in the distant sky, followed by a low rumble—Nature now seemed to be protesting and warning him against desecrating the virgin's body further. He refused to heed the signs, but thought instead, "Rain is coming," and began hacking the corpse more quickly and indiscriminately, removing and stuffing the organs into a bag as fast as he could.

After taking all that he wanted, Saifuddin quickly scanned the corpse to see if he had missed anything. It was only then he realised how he had destroyed Nora's features totally and reduced her beautiful body into a gory pulp. For the first time in his grave robbing career, Saifuddin felt guilty about his actions. Hastily, he began re-burying the body, haphazardly throwing earth over the bloody remains.

A tiny whiff of a wind began, breaking the oppressive humidity. Saifuddin froze, his changkul in mid-air: What was that noise? No, it was just the wind rustling through the trees. Saifuddin continued his work. And then, there was that sound again, that whispery sound... He looked around and saw no one, only the half-buried corpse at his feet. No, it was just his

imagination. By now, the wind was quickly picking up speed, whipping dead leaves about and softly whistling through the trees. And the strange sound he first heard moments ago was now getting louder too. It seemed like a singing whisper that went on and on just behind the wind—and he could begin to make out the words: “Di mana hati ku? Siapa curi hati ku?”

Then the wind suddenly died down and so did the strange sound. A man not easily scared, Saifuddin nevertheless worked his changkul at top speed. As he finally finished his task of burying the corpse, lightning streaked through the sky, thunder rumbled and large drops of rain began pelting down. Saifuddin quickly grabbed his lantern, knife, changkul and bag of body parts, making his way into the jungle towards where the bomoh lived—anxious to get out of the storm, deliver the goods, get his reward, and above all, be rid of his guilt.

Even in the jungle, there was no escaping away from the mother of all monsoon rains that was now beating down. Despite his lantern and being familiar with the jungle path, Saifuddin could barely see more than a few inches in front of him. As he stumbled through the rain and darkness, he became aware that the wind was building up once more, whipping through the trees. Just behind the wind came that whispery singing again, even more urgent than before, “Di mana hati ku? Siapa curi hati ku?” Saifuddin quickened his steps away from the strange singing as best he could, but to no avail. The sound seemed to be chasing after him and gaining on him. The closer it got, the louder it became: “Di mana hati ku? Siapa curi hati ku?”

A bolt of lightning suddenly streaked from the sky and hit a tree some distance away from Saifuddin. In that flash of light, he saw by the tree a white shrouded figure extending its arms towards him. Saifuddin screamed, dropped his lantern and stumbled senselessly about the jungle away from that apparition. Still the rain came pelting down and still the wind and sound followed him, even closer than before: “Di mana hati ku? Siapa curi hati ku?” Another bolt of lightning streaked down from the sky, hitting the ground just five feet away from Saifuddin and revealing again the white shrouded figure. Saifuddin froze in his tracks. Above the noise of the storm, the white figure sang, “Di mana hati ku? Siapa curi hati ku? Kau yang umbil!” Then it sprang forward, plunging its claw-like hands into Saifuddin’s chest, pulling out his heart and liver.

By the next morning, the storm was finally over and the sun rose in the sky. Ali the hunter woke up early, immersing himself in a hunt to forget his grief of losing Nora. Not far into the jungle, he came upon the lifeless but intact body of Saifuddin, his eyes wide opened with fear and his arms clutching his chest. His changkul was next to him, but nothing else. The villagers surmised that Saifuddin, accidentally caught out in the previous night’s terrible storm, had been so frightened by the tempest that he suffered a fatal heart attack. Dutifully, they buried him where he had spent most of his waking hours working. That moonlit night, there was a new visitor to the graveyard: it was the bomoh, slowly digging up the body of Saifuddin...

The Stray Cat

A lot of office workers would often spend their lunch hour at a certain downtown hawker centre. They were not the only visitors. Winding among the legs of the seated luncheoners were a few stray cats that would try to catch the eyes of the crowd and beg for food.

There was nothing special about these cats. They were your average skanky-looking alley cats that ordinary people would not pay more than a second glance at. However, there was in particular a young female feline with big bright hopeful eyes and a shy meow that would mesmerize young secretaries into giving her the occasional bit of fishcake and white chicken. The cat would then thank her benefactors by rubbing her warm body against their legs, causing the women to squeal in surprise.

One day, the cat spotted the handsomest young man she had ever seen before. He not only smelt nice, but was also most kind and generous. Upon the first meow, he actually gave the cat an entire chicken breast to eat. That was it. The cat was in love. She rubbed herself against his legs in gratitude, wishing that he would pick her up and take her home forever.

Unfortunately, that was not to be. The young man received an urgent call on his handphone and off he zoomed to don't know where. Although the man often returned to the hawker centre for lunch, he would be surrounded by pretty female colleagues and never again paid the cat any attention. The cat was heartbroken.

In desperation, the cat prayed again and again to the Goddess of Love: "Please, please, please turn me into the most beautiful woman ever so that I can woo this man of my dreams." After the cat pleaded ceaselessly for a hundred days and nights, the Goddess of Love finally took pity and transformed the cat into a woman a thousand times more gorgeous than the models in an Expressions or Silkpro ad. Needless to say, when the young man next walked into the hawker centre and saw this magnificent creature, he fell in love with her. Within three months, the couple signed up for an HDB flat and were married.

The eighty-table wedding dinner was held at one of the ritziest hotels in town. Everything went fantastically well until... The groom was on stage serenading the bride with Yue Liang Dai Biao Wo De Xing, when suddenly a mouse appeared on the six-tier wedding cake, jumped onto the tree of champagne glasses, where it almost drowned in champagne, before scuttling down to the floor towards the kitchens.

As the groom complained vociferously to the management, the bride, dressed in her Jazreel Low gown, first leapt up onto a chair in fright, and then suddenly scampered, catlike, on all fours after the mouse. Before anyone could recover their wits, there again on the dais was the bride, this time crouching with the mouse dangling between her teeth. Her mother-in-law fainted in shock when the bride tipped back her head, and in two gulps, swallowed the mouse whole.

Sadly, as this tale recounts: One may be able to change one's appearance, but one cannot change one's nature.

Sources of Inspiration:

- Zipes, Jack. (1995). 'Aphrodite and the Cat'. Creative Storytelling: Building Community, Changing Lives. New York: Routledge, p. 138.
- Gibbs, Laura (translator). (2002). 'Fable 350: Aphrodite and the Weasel'. Aesop's Fables. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 166.

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Hair

Before I begin, I wish to state this disclaimer: Any resemblance to or similarity with any person dead or living is purely coincidental and not intentional.

Ms Margaret Tan was "a woman of a certain age", as that Tina Turner song used to go. But she didn't look it as she knew how to take care of herself. Consequently, Mr Bernard Wong, a rich divorced businessman of mature years, was very much attracted to her.

At the same time, Ms Sharon Lee, a pretty young thing with a penchant for older men, did a Britney Spears' "Oops! I did it again!". While at Zouk one ladies' night, she was introduced to Mr Wong. Together, they began a torrid love affair.

After meeting both women, Mr Wong failed to spend any more "lonesome nights" on his own at the karaoke crooning old Elvis Presley hits. In fact, he was quite organised about spending time with his two lovers. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, he would accompany Ms Tan out on intimate candlelit dinners or bring her to glitzy society events. On Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday nights, he would meet Ms Lee for cosy rendezvous at Orchard Cineleisure (you know, those couple seats) or passionate dancing at throbbing discos. On Sundays, Mr Wong would stay at home on his own for even a man of his libido needed rest.

Because Mr Wong sought their companionship (albeit separately) so often, each woman began seeing herself as Mrs Bernard Wong the Fourth. Ms Tan felt that her claim over Mr Wong was as solid as could be for she practically acted as his wife, hosting Mr Wong's company functions and being acknowledged as his constant companion by his peers. Ms Lee, knowing that Mr Wong was childless, felt that surely he would marry her soon and start a family with her.

However because Mr Wong was so strict in adhering to his schedule of spending time with his lovers, Ms Tan and Ms Lee soon became aware of each other's existence as rivals for Mr Wong's affections. Each woman then began her own campaign to appear as Mr Wong's ideal companion and so win his heart. Thus, they both unknowingly began to fuss over Mr Wong's hair. Mr Wong, on his part, lapped up all this tender loving and began imagining that his appearance was improving day by day with all the grooming attention that Ms Tan and Ms Lee were lavishing on him.

I hate to be cruel, but I have to admit that instead of becoming more handsome, in the end Mr Wong became bald! And not even Beijing 101 or Glower Trichologist could ever help him. How was this so? All because on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, the young Ms Lee would pluck out each strand of his grey hairs; and on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, the mature Ms Tan would pluck out every single black hair.

Sources of Inspiration:

- Gibbs, Laura (translator). (2002). 'Fable 584: The Bald Man and His Two Mistresses'. Aesop's Fables. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 269.
- Ramanujan, A.K. (1991). 'Between Two Wives'. Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 207

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